NATIONAL GATHERING OF PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN

AMES, IOWA

JULY 13, 1994

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL REVIEW MET FOR APPROXIMATELY FIFTY HOURS IN WICHITA LAST MONTH. THE LEADERSHIP TEAM SPENT AT LEAST THAT MUCH TIME, BEFORE AND AFTER HOURS, PLANNING, STRATEGIZING, WRITING, DISCUSSING, ARGUING, PRAYING, LAUGHING, WEEPING. THE REPORT IT PRODUCED WAS APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY. THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ITSELF APPROVED IT BY AN UNPRECEDENTED MARGIN, PROBABLY CLOSER TO UNANIMINITY THAN WE PRESBYTERIANS WILL COME ON ANY ISSUE.

THERE WAS LITTLE TIME IN THE MIDST OF IT TO REFLECT ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT HAPPENED, BUT FROM THE MOMENT THAT FRIDAY AFTERNOON WHEN I SETTLED INTO MY SEAT FOR THE FLIGHT BACK TO CHICAGO, I HAVE BEEN THINKING AND ASKING, "WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

I'M GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO THINK OUT LOUD WITH YOU... AND TO THANK PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN, LOUISVILLE STAFF PERSONS, OFFICERS, AND MANY, MANY INDIVIDUALS FOR THEIR STRONG SUPPORT AND PRAYERS. OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCED PAIN, IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, AS A RESULT OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) TO THE RE-IMAGINING CONFERENCE, NONE WAS MORE PERSONAL THAN THE PAIN OF WOMEN WHO PLANNED THE CONFERENCE, ATTENDED IT, LOVED IT, AND WHO FOUND THEMSELVES CRITICIZED, MALIGNED, THEIR PERSONAL

JUDGMENT QUESTIONED AND THEIR FAITH JUDGED AS HERETICAL. I AM GRATEFUL THAT THE RESULTANT ANGER WAS NOT EXPRESSED VINDICTIVELY, THAT PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN, EVEN WHEN THE REPORT WAS EVOLVING IN A WAY THAT DID NOT SAY WHAT SOME WANTED IT TO SAY, OR LEFT UNSAID THINGS THAT SOME HOPED WOULD BE SAID LOUDLY AND CLEARLY, WERE UNFAILING SUPPORTED, PRESENT WITH THE COMMITTEE, EAGER TO BE HELPFUL - IN THOUGHT BECOMING FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH SOMETHING OF A MODEL OF HOW CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND MEN MIGHT JUST FIND A WAY TO STAY TOGETHER EVEN WHILE THEY ARE EXPE-RIENCING DIFFERENCES, SEPARATION, HURT AND ANGER.

WHAT HAPPENED? WHEN ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES WAS DELIVERING THE CONCERNS OF THE CHURCH IN WORSHIP LAST SUNDAY, HE WAS ANNOUNCING THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY REPORT I WILL GIVE DURING THE ADULT

EDUCATION HOUR NEXT SUNDAY AND HE SAID SOMETHING LIKE "JOHN BUCHANAN WILL EXPLAIN HOW HIS COMMITTEE RESTORED HARMONY TO THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH." WELL, THAT IS A VERY NICE THING FOR A COLLEAGUE TO SAY, BUT IT WAS AND IS A BIT EMULATIVE(?). IN FACT, MY 31 YEARS AS AN ORDAINED CLERGYPERSON HAD ME TO CONCLUDE THAT LIKE AIRLINE FOOD, DEPENDABLE POSTAL SERVICE, AND SIMPLE ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS ENCLOSED, "PRESBYTERIAN HARMONY" IS SOMETHING OF AN OXYMORON. MY OWN EXPERIENCE, AND MY READING OF THE PRESBYTERIAN PRESENCE IN AMERICAN AND BRITISH HISTORY SUGGESTS THAT HARMONY IS NOT OUR THING: THAT THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT US - AND ABOUT THE WAY WE RE-IMAGINED THE CHURCH AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION WHICH SUGGESTS THAT SOMETHING GOOD AND HEALTHY AND MAYBE EVEN OCCASIONALLY HOLY HAPPENS WHEN GOD'S

PEOPLE CARE DEEPLY ENOUGH ABOUT JESUS CHRIST AND LIVING FAITHFULLY, TO CONTEND WITH ONE ANOTHER, TO GET WORKED UP AND RED IN THE FACE... SO WE DIDN'T RESTORE HARMONY. AND IF YOU THINK WE DID, TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT WE ARE FACING AS A CHURCH, THE DIFFICULT DECISIONS WHICH LIE AHEAD AND THE DEPTH OF OUR DISAGREEMENTS WITH ONE ANOTHER.

SO - IF NOT HARMONY - WHAT HAPPENED? I THINK WE, QUITE SIMPLY, REDISCOVERED WHO WE ARE - AD I THINK IT WAS A GIFT, A MOMENT OF GRACE WHICH HAD FAR MORE TO DO WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT THAN ANYONE ELSE. WE REMEMBERED, OR WERE REMINDED, OR RE-IMAGINED, IF YOU WILL, WHOSE WE ARE, THAT IN LIFE AND IN DEATH AND IN ALL THE ARGUMENTS BETWEEN, WE BELONG TO JESUS CHRIST. AND IN THAT, WE MAY HAVE REDISCOVERED A METHODOLOGY FOR OUR LIFE TOGETHER IN THE DAYS AHEAD.

WE CAME TO WICHITA WITH OUR MINDS NOT QUITE MADE UP, BUT CERTAINLY HAVING STAKED OUT SOMETHING OF A POSITION ON THE ISSUE BEFORE US. WE HAD, EACH OF US, BEEN LOBBIED, CALLED, WRITTEN TO, AND INSTRUCTED BY FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES AND PEOPLE WE DIDN'T KNOW - OR TO WHAT WENT WRONG IN MINNEAPOLIS AND LOUISVILLE AND WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO ABOUT IT.

HAD WE BEGAN OUR PROCEEDINGS THERE - WITH OUR POSITIONS ON THE IDEOLOGICAL/THEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM STAKED OUT, DEFENDED, BUTTRESSED, AND OUR ATTACK STRATEGIES IN THE PROCESS OF FORMULATION, WE WOULD HAVE FRACTURED, COME APART. SOMEONE WOULD HAVE WON. OTHERS WOULD HAVE LOST. PAT BUCHANAN WOULD HAVE BEEN PLEASED AT A SUCCESSFUL SKIRMISH IN A PRECIOUS CULTURAL WAR.

INSTEAD WE INTENTIONALLY STAYED SOME DISTANCE FROM THE ISSUE AND GOT TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER: CATTLE RANCHER WHO WANTED SOMEONE TO PLEASE TELL HIM WHAT IN THE WORLD FEMINIST THEOLOGY IS; YAD FROM THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS WHO WANTED EVERYBODY TO PRAY MORE AND WAS HANDING OUT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION PICTURES; LAY COMMISSIONER FROM THE SOUTHEAST WHO INTRODUCED HIMSELF TO US BY SAYING "I HAVE RELEVANT INFORMATION, SOPHIA IS OK BY ME. I'VE BEEN MARRIED TO HER FOR 38 YEARS AND WE HAVE FIVE CHILDREN."

WE LISTENED TO THE CHURCH - THE OVERTURE ADVOCATES FROM THE 50 PRESBYTERIANS WHO WISHED TO BE HEARD, AND MANY OF WHOM WERE ALREADY ANGRY ON THE BASIS OF THE ASSUMPTION THAT THEY WOULDN'T BE

HEARD - AGREED TO CLUSTER INTO FIVE GROUPS AND THE COMMITTEE LISTENED VERY CAREFULLY TO FIVE SUBSTANTIVE PRESENTATIONS.

WE LISTENED TO INDIVIDUAL PRESBYTERIANS ALL DAY SUNDAY, 102 OF THEM TWO MINUTES EACH...EACH ONE OF WHOM FELT DEEPLY ENOUGH ABOUT THE ISSUE TO WAIT IN LINE AND SAY HER OR HIS PIECE.

AND WE BEGAN TO HEAR, I THINK, AND TO SEE THESE PEOPLE NOT SO MUCH AS IDEOLOGICALLY ADVERSARIES WHO WERE EITHER RIGHT OR WRONG, BUT SISTERS AND BROTHERS WHO LOVE GOD AND THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND CARE VERY MUCH ABOUT ITS FAITHFULNESS.

AND THEN WE HEARD FROM AUTHORITIES - PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN LEADERS, THEOLOGIANS: THE_____ ADAM, SALLY HILL, ROBERTA HOEST_____. AND WHEN FINELY THE COMMITTEE MEMBERS BEGAN TO TALK TO

ONE ANOTHER ABOUT WHAT WE HAD HEARD AND WHERE WE WERE, IT WAS APPARENT THAT SOMETHING WAS HAPPENING. POSITIONS HAD SOFTENED AND SOMETHING OTHER THAN WINNING AND LOSING EMERGED AS A COMMUNITY VALUE, NAMELY THE FACT THAT IT JUST MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO STAY WITH ONE ANOTHER, MAYBE EVEN TO LOVE EACH OTHER. WE DECIDED TO SIMPLY GO AROUND THE ROOM AND ASK EACH MEMBER TO CHECK IN - TO SAY WHERE HE OR SHE WAS AT THE MOMENT. IT WAS A POWERFUL EXPERIENCE: THERE WERE LOTS OF TEARS. PEOPLE SAID IMPORTANT THINGS TO ONE ANOTHER LIKE "I LOVE THIS CHURCH." "I WANT THIS TO BE A CHURCH LIKE THIS FOR A LONG TIME." "THIS MIGHT BE MY LAST G.A. AND I'D LIKE IT TO MATTER. "THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH SAVED MY LIFE - TOOK ME IN WHEN NO ONE ELSE WOULD...WE GOTTA HELP SAVE IT." ETC.

AND SO, A GIFT OF GRACE: UNANIMITY IN A REPORT BUT MORE IMPORTANT A REMINDER THAT GOD'S PEOPLE CAN SURVIVE CONTROVERSY, WHEN THEY REMEMBER WHO THEY ARE.

THE REPORT IS NOT PERFECT. IT TRIES TO AFFIRM THE GIFTS, DEDICATION AND LEADERSHIP OF NATIONAL STAFF PERSONS, AT THE SAME TIME IT SUGGESTS THAT MUCH OF THE CHURCH WAS NOT HAPPY WITH THE WAY ITS NATIONAL LEADERS RESPONDED TO THE MATTER. IT NAMES NO NAMES. THERE WERE SUGGESTIONS THAT IT LAY BLAME OR THAT IT DEFEND AND EXONERATE INDIVIDUALS ACROSS THE SPECTRUM - BY NAME. THE COMMITTEE DECIDED NOT TO DO THAT. I DO NOT KNOW WHETHER OR NOT IT WOULD HAVE CHANGED ITS POSITION, BUT THE COMMITTEE WAS NOT AWARE OF THE CONTENT OF MARY ANN LUNDY'S SPEECH ABOUT HER LEAVING HER POSITION - WHEN IT WAS EDITING AND APPROVING ITS REPORT.

THE REPORT AFFIRMS THE PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL TRADITION, PARTICULARLY AT THE POINTS SOME THOUGHT THE TRADITION WAS CRITICIZED, OR RIDICULED. IT TRIES TO DO SO, NOT DEFENSIVELY, BUT JOYFULLY AND GRATEFULLY. AND IT SAYS CLEARLY THAT IMAGINATION IS PART OF THE THEOLOGICAL TASK IN EVERY AGE. AS IT HAPPENED - I FLEW FROM WICHITA TO ROME. AND ONE OF MY LASTING MEMORIES WILL BE STANDING IN THE BASILICA OF ST. PETER, JUST HOURS AFTER THE CONCLUDING COMMUNION SERVICE OF THE 206TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AND FEELING DEEPLY GRATEFUL THAT JOHN CALVIN RE-IMAGINED THE CHURCH.

THE REPORT UNEQUIVOCALLY AFFIRMS THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH, AND SPECIFICALLY THE VOICES OF WOMEN IN THE ONGOING TASK OF THEOLOGY.

THE TOUGHEST QUESTION OF ALL IS - DID WE COMPROMISE? DID WE SELLOUT? WERE WE BLUDGEONED BY IDEOLOGICAL WARFARE _____ ACCOMMODATING TOO MUCH? DID WE SACRIFICE TOO MUCH JUSTICE FOR THE SAKE OF UNITY?

I DON'T THINK SO. I THINK THAT WHAT WE DID, IN FACT, IS A FAITHFUL EXPRESSION OF THE VERY THEOLOGY WE HOLD DEAR.

IN HIS PROVOCATIVE THEOLOGY, THINKING THE FAITH, JOHN HALL SAYS THAT MODERN - POST - CONSTANTINIAN CHRISTIANS HOLD ONE OF TWO POSITIONS ABOUT BELIEVING, HAVING FAITH.

ONE IS THE OBJECTIVE POSITION. I KNOW INTELLECTUALLY THE TRUTH OF MY BELIEFS. GOD IS, GOD'S SON IS JESUS. THE _____ BEARS WITNESS TO JESUS CHRIST AUTHORITATIVELY. THESE IDEAS ARE OBJECTIVE TRUTH.

THE OTHER POSITION IS SUBJECTIVE: I BELIEVE BECAUSE I FEEL THE TRUTH. I EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND _____ AND PRESENCE. I BELIEVE BECAUSE I FEEL.

PROFESSOR HALL SAYS BOTH OF THESE CLASSIC POSITIONS ARE INADEQUATE. BIBLICAL FAITH, HE SAYS, IS NOT A MATTER OF KNOWING OR FEELING SO MUCH AS TRUSTING. FAITH IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE WE KNOW TO BE TRUSTWORTHY. "FAITH IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE KNOW OURSELVES ENCOUNT_____, JUDGED, AND ACCEPTED BY A GRACIOUS GOD."

I THINK THAT'S WHAT WE REDISCOVERED: THAT THE COMMON GROUND ON WHICH WE STAND AND CAN STAND - IS TRUST IN GOD: TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST AND RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER WITHIN GOD'S BROAD AND INCLUSIVE GRACE.

WHEN YOU START THERE, CREATIVE AND REDEMPTIVE THINGS HAPPEN. WHEN YOU START ON THE BASIS OF FAITH, NOT AS A WELL TO _____ ELECT ON AND THE DAR_____ OUT, BUT A PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST, YOU ARE ABLE SUDDENLY TO TALK, TO SPEAK AND LISTEN: TO ENGAGE IN THAT CIVIL DISCOURSE CORNEL WEST SAYS IS THE ONLY THING THAT CAN SAVE OUR NATION. IT SIMPLY IS GOD'S WAY OF SAVING A CHURCH - I BELIEVE. AND IT JUST MAY BE NOT ONLY A WAY TO MOVE FAITHFULLY INTO THE FUTURE, BUT ALSO OUR GIFT TO GIVE TO THE WORLD, AND OUR WORD TO SPEAK TO THE WORLD.